

# From academia to freelance medical writing: Navigating the transition

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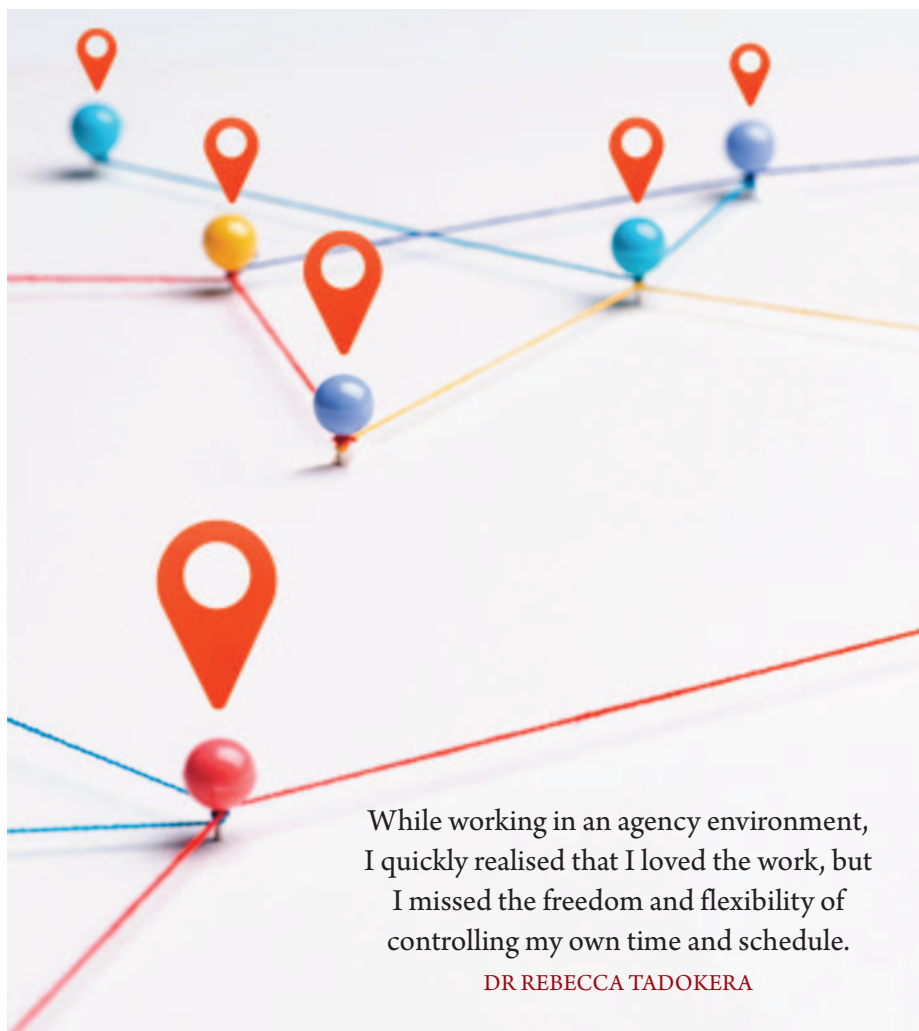
## Abstract

Academics who have transitioned to medical communications (MedComms) find that there are many parallels between the two fields, leading to fulfilling and rewarding careers. Many of the skills honed in academia such as research, technical writing, and rigour are transferable to MedComms. Technical competence alone, however, is not enough. The transition from academia to freelance medical writing presents a unique set of challenges with a steep learning curve. In this article, four ex-academics share their transition journeys from academia to freelance medical writing, the challenges they encountered, and their learnings. Apart from the core business of writing, freelancers must wear many hats to be able to operate a successful business. Additional skills such as networking, marketing, and business management are a fundamental requirement for success as a freelancer. Equally important is skilfully defining your niche for services and positioning yourself as an expert to potential clients.

## Introduction

**Y**ou are a medical writer? What exactly do you do? Do you write prescriptions for medical doctors? Are you a science journalist? These are the kind of questions I get whenever I meet people and tell them what I do. It gets more awkward when I tell them that I work freelance. *Who are your clients? How do you find clients?*

When you come to think that medical writing is still in its infancy in South Africa, all these



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questions are understandable. But even in the western world, medical writing – of which MedComms is one type – is still an obscure profession, from an outsider's viewpoint. Once you are in the profession, that viewpoint quickly changes. Medical writing is an overwhelmingly vast profession. There are so many specialties and sub-specialties, that it is hard to make headway in the profession without an element of niching down.

Because medical writing is such a non-standard career path, each person you meet has a unique transition story to tell, no matter which part of the world they come from. Despite the profession having been in existence for a while, not many institutions in the world offer formal

training or degrees in medical writing. Most medical writers I know profess to have “stumbled” across the career path. While the transition from academia is bold, many others have made the more daring leap from academia to freelance medical writing.

Working as a freelance medical writer presents various challenges and opportunities. For this article, I compiled the perspectives and transition journeys of four ex-academics from different parts of the world – myself included – into the world of freelance medical writing. I hope that through sharing our stories, we encourage many others to see possibilities and take “the road less trodden” of becoming a freelance medical writer.

## Q1. Can you share a bit of your transitioning story from academia to freelance medical writing and what led to that decision?

**Rebecca Tadokera:** Having committed over 12 years of my career to tuberculosis (TB) research, the decision to hang up my lab coat was both painful and challenging. Funding for TB research is notoriously difficult to win, especially in developing countries like South Africa where I am based. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic did not help matters. TB became one of the biggest casualties. Funding initially targeted for TB work was quickly diverted to COVID-19 research. This coincided with the time I was applying for funding to extend my soft-funded research fellowship on my path to becoming a principal investigator (PI). Eventually, I realised that I had two options: I either had to pivot to a new field of research that was better funded or start a new career altogether. I was frustrated with having to constantly fight for research funding, so I decided to leave academia completely.

My transition into MedComms has been two-fold. First, I transitioned from academia to a MedComms agency environment, before transitioning to work freelance. Agency environments can be challenging for someone who is used to the flexibility and autonomy of working in academia. While working in an agency environment, I quickly realised that I loved the work, but I missed the freedom and flexibility of controlling my own time and schedule. Eventually, I decided to transition to work in the MedComms space as a freelancer.

**Vicky Sherwood:** I ventured into the world of MedComms more than 6 years ago, having left behind a PI position in cancer research. As an academic in the UK, I found myself working longer and harder for dwindling funding, pension

cuts, financial insecurity (with a mortgage, kids, and a car), an increased teaching workload, departmental micromanagement, and a salary that didn't keep up with the cost of living. All this led me to re-evaluate my academic career. With the economic uncertainty of Brexit looming at the time, I just couldn't see things getting any better. Would I spend the next three decades of my working life worrying about finances and spending most of my weekends applying for funding?

To gain back control, I decided to explore my options outside of academia by networking and talking to folks who worked in the pharmaceutical industry. Fast-forward a year, and the networking efforts paid off. I'd discovered an area of the pharma industry that allowed me to incorporate all the things I loved most about being a scientist; scientific writing, medical education, and the potential for improving patients' lives – medical writing. I honed my medical writing skills at MedComms agencies first.

**Morgana Moretti:** Going back to the lab after maternity leave about four years ago, I realised I was unhappy doing academic research, especially the bench work. So, after having worked in neuroscience research for over 12 years, I started exploring other career options in industry. When the pandemic arrived and lab activities completely ceased, I explored some medical writing

opportunities through freelance platforms. I figured it could be an excellent opportunity to use my science knowledge and skills outside the lab bench. I started freelancing part-time while still working in the lab in 2020 and since April 2022, I have been running my medical writing freelance business full-time.

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**Arianna Ferrini:** I started doing some freelance medical and scientific writing on the side during the COVID-19 pandemic. I think the pandemic gave me the space and time to stop and reflect on what I wanted to do "when I grew up" – something I had not done after I had completed my Ph.D. Writing and communicating science has always been a big passion of mine, so combining these two passions with my love for science and research was almost natural.

For 12 years, I was an academic researcher, and, despite the well-known challenges of this job, I loved it. However, after my PhD, I had lost some of my motivation and started thinking about alternative careers. Leaving the lab was a very hard decision because I had always thought I would have gone for an academic career. But looking back now, more than two years later, I can honestly say it was one of the best decisions I ever made. Working as a freelance medical writer I can use my scientific expertise in a job where I feel valued for the work that I do and I have some flexibility, that, having a young family, is priceless.



**Vicky Sherwood, PhD,** is a freelance scientific writer, located in the UK, and the host of the careers blog Biomed Badass Blog.

**Morgana Moretti, PhD,** is a freelance medical writer and scientific consultant located in Santa Catarina, Brazil.

**Arianna Ferrini, PhD,** is a freelance medical writer and scientific consultant located in London, UK.

## Q2. What were the biggest challenges in your transition, and how did you overcome them?

**Rebecca Tadokera:** I would say that the challenges have been different at each stage of the transition. Firstly, leaving academia is not something that academics discuss openly. Anyone who has tried to move out of academia will know that scarcity of information on alternative career options is one of the reasons why many PhDs do not even think about leaving academia. Yes, I had made the decision to leave. But now what? How, and where would I start?

My network consisted mainly of fellow academic researchers. I knew only a handful of people who had left academia after their PhDs. Networking, especially through LinkedIn, was a fundamental part of my transition into MedComms. The two entry-level roles I eventually interviewed for were through referrals from networks.

Another challenge stems from the obscurity of the MedComms field, making it difficult to break into. As a freelancer starting out, one of the biggest challenges I faced was in acquiring clients. You need credibility for people to trust you and hire you. Yet again, my networks have been my saving grace. Most of the freelance contracts I have won have been referrals through my networks. It is through my networks and mentors adopted along the way that I have consolidated my skills and expertise as a medical writer.

**Vicky Sherwood:** What else can I do? When I reached the point of asking myself this question as an academic, I had little knowledge of life outside of the academy. I'd spent 15 years building my academic career. Most of my contacts were academics, the majority of my work experience was

academic, and at the time, I wasn't sure if my skills were transferable to other types of employment. I had so much self-doubt and worried about how potential employers would view me.

I needed to find people who could help me answer some of these questions. LinkedIn was my solution for this. I focused on finding and connecting with pharma professionals with a similar educational background to myself, or who had studied or worked at the same institutions. It was this approach that serendipitously led me to connect with medical writers and realise that this career would provide a fantastic opportunity for the future.

Medical writing is very different from academic writing. It was a steep learning curve – I needed to learn the processes, compliance and regulatory approval requirements, and client-facing skills, and I needed to learn fast! As an associate medical writer working in MedComms agencies, I was fortunate to have seasoned professionals and a supportive team who were more than willing to answer my questions. This foundation accelerated my learning and prepared me for the world of freelance writing that was yet to come.

**Morgana Moretti:** My biggest challenges when transitioning from academia to medical writing were networking and marketing my services.

As an academic, I was used to focusing primarily on individual work and wasn't familiar with the processes and techniques involved in building a successful freelance business, including marketing strategies.

To overcome these challenges, I reached out to other medical writers and industry professionals to learn more about their experiences. This helped me develop a better understanding of the industry and to identify opportunities for building my network.

I also started consuming marketing information and intentionally cultivating my brand. I initially used LinkedIn to strengthen my brand image, before creating a website showcasing my work and services.

**Arianna Ferrini:** I think the transition needed the mindset shift to see myself as a business owner, on top of everything. As a freelancer, you get to wear many hats, so at the beginning, that was one of my main challenges. Investing in a business coach and taking time to reflect on how I wanted to build my business helped me overcome this challenge.

Adding to this was that as an academic, I thought I had to be "an expert" at everything. But that is impossible in medical writing, especially at the beginning. Eventually, realising that all those years of academic research gave me all the necessary tools to carry out excellent work even in areas where I would not consider myself an expert was an eye-opener.

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## Q3. Which key transferable skills or qualities would you say have been critical to your success as a freelance medical writer?

**Rebecca Tadokera:** Success in freelancing requires so many different skills. Firstly, the technical skills of being able to research, write well, and follow guidelines, just like in academia, are a given. Agility, collaboration, networking, project management, and marketing are key skills that may not necessarily be transferable but are critical for freelancers. As a freelancer, you are not just a technical expert, but also a business owner. This means you have to wear multiple hats for your business to succeed.

**Vicky Sherwood:** The key to my freelancing career has been the contacts and knowledge

I built up during my time as a full-time employee in agencies and big pharma. The exposure to multiple project types during this time provided me with a foundation that I could draw upon to deliver high-quality materials for my clients. Equally important is the network that I've built up during my time in agencies. These enabled me to find and work with high-paying clients in the sector, ensuring that I was never short of work as a freelancer.

**Morgana Moretti:** Technical skills are important, but I believe it's the soft skills that set the best freelance medical writer apart from the pack. Skills like organisation, adaptability, problem-

solving, and time management help a project run smoothly and efficiently. These skills – many acquired in academia – have been crucial to my success as a freelance medical writer.

**Arianna Ferrini:** The ability to be resourceful and manage time and projects have been critical for me as a freelancer. As part of my job, I do a lot of training on scientific writing and publishing, so I am often giving presentations. These are public speaking skills I honed during my time in academia. Equally important for one to succeed as a freelancer is the self-motivation and dedication required.

#### Q4. In your opinion, how important is it to have a niche as a medical writer and how does that compare with working in academia?

**Rebecca Tadokera:** As a new freelancer, it's tempting to think that casting your net wider means you are more likely to get clients. This was my thinking as well when I first started as a freelancer. The problem with this strategy is that because you are working on so many different pieces, it can get very exhausting. It takes some time to come up to speed with a new area. And again, you become more of a generalist as you only scratch the surface and never really go deep into any particular subject, nor are you recognised as an expert. But then, having said that, sometimes trying out different projects is good for gaining experience, especially when starting. Only then can you make an informed decision about what you like and would want to pursue more of.

When you think about it, freelance medical writing has parallels with academia. Academics tend to be hyper-focused in a specific niche area. This is the only way to gain recognition, authority, and credibility in the field. In medical

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writing though, there are different ways of specialising. While some will specialise based on the type of outputs, others will specialise by therapy area. Whichever way you do it, niching

down is the one way to establish yourself as a freelance medical writer.

Personally, I have narrowed down to the two therapeutic areas that excite me the most: immunology and oncology. I have a preference for continuing educational material but continue to do scientific publications and grant writing.

**Vicky Sherwood:** Employers tend to like to tap into my cancer research knowledge and at times I've found myself pigeonholed into oncology writing positions. I enjoy oncology writing but sometimes I feel this can be to the detriment of gaining wider therapeutic area expertise. As a freelancer, I found it easier to gain exposure to more diverse therapeutic areas for projects. Agility is helpful as a freelancer. Being able to turn your hand to

whatever projects come your way is useful to keep client options open and ensure a steady stream of work as a freelancer.

**Morgana Moretti:** Niching down is important because you can build authority in your industry and speak directly to your ideal client. In addition, you can focus on training opportunities related to your niche, which translates into significant value for clients. And when you are valuable to clients, you can keep a consistent flow of work coming. A niche in medical writing can be the subject matter you write about, the type of client you work with, or your writing style. This differs from academia, where a niche is usually a research topic or technique in which you choose to become a specialist.

**Arianna Ferrini:** I think it's important to have a niche and to know what kind of projects you prefer working on and what type of clients you would want to work with. Not so much in terms of therapeutic areas or deliverables. Actually, regarding those, I'd rather keep it varied so I don't get bored!

#### Conclusions

The career transition from academia to freelance medical writing provides fulfilment and flexibility for many ex-academics for whom technical competence, rigour, and scientific acumen have been honed over years of working in academia. Nonetheless, this transition also presents unique challenges, due to the differences between these two fields. Additional skills such as sales and marketing skills are also essential, which most academics do not necessarily acquire during their many years of academic research but are key to success for freelance medical writers.

The key to acquiring these skills is to be open to learning from others in the industry and learning by doing. Medical writers need to have both depth and breadth of expertise. Like in academia, establishing a niche as a freelancer helps you stand out from the crowd and position yourself as an expert. The benefits, of niching

down, be it by therapeutic area, type of deliverable, or type of client, are evident in the success of freelance medical writers.

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#### Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.



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Some of her previous work in academia can be found in her Google Scholar profile at:

<https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=33yBjjYAAAAJ&hl=en>